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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes a symposium on issues in rural education held at the 1996 European Conference on Educational Research held in Seville, Spain. The symposium aimed to gather contextual information about rural primary schools and included presentations from researchers in Sweden, Finland, Scotland, Ireland, and Greece. Participants from the Netherlands, Wales, England, and Norway also shared information about small, rural schools. The following themes emerged: (1) the large proportion of small rural schools in Europe that are disadvantaged and lack a voice in national educational policy formation; (2) the need to establish professional support for rural teachers; (3) a tendency for rural schools to be staffed by unqualified or inexperienced teachers; (4) continued rural depopulation, subsequent school closures, and in some cases intercommunity animosity; (5) the lack of research targeted specifically on rural school issues; (6) official indifference to the plight of rural schools; and (7) the implementation of educational strategies that lack adequate evaluation of their educational efficacy. The symposium also identified positive developments and areas for further research, including the renewed role of small rural schools, legislation allowing establishment of small private schools in rural areas, coverage of small rural schools in existing national databases, positive effects of locally relevant curriculum, value of interschool collaboration for mutual support, and potential of information technology to reduce isolation of rural students and teachers. This paper also addresses the possibility of developing a rural education research network and identifies areas for collaborative research. An appendix includes abstracts of four symposium presentations on rural education in Ireland, Sweden, Greece, and Finland. (LP)

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Rural Education
Special Interest Group

Issues in rural primary education in Europe: a summary of a symposium on issues in rural education

held at the

European Conference on Educational Research , Seville, Spain; September 1996

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Issues in rural primary education in Europe

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Summary of a symposium on research on
rural education in Europe
which took place at the

European Conference on Educational Research
Seville, Spain
25 - 29 September 1996

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The Symposium

Chair: **Bridget Somekh** (Then Scottish Council for Educational Research, UK; now University of Huddersfield, UK)
Convenor and discussant: **Linda Hargreaves,** School of Education, University of Leicester, UK (nda@leicester.ac.uk)

Presentations:*

Ciaran Sugrue St Patrick's College, Dublin City University, Eire
Rural education in Ireland: issues and concerns

Lisbeth Åberg-Bengtsson Göteborg University, Sweden
Education in small rural Swedish schools: an initial overview of the field

Dr Evangelia Tressou-Milona Aristotle University of Thessalonika, Greece
The small rural schools in Greece: a new role in a changing society
(Presented in Dr Tressou-Milona's absence by Linda Hargreaves)

Eija Kimonen & Raimo Nevalainen University of Jyväskylä, Finland
Teachers facing the challenges of curriculum change in the small rural school in Finland

Joanna McPake & Bridget Somekh Scottish Council for Research in Education **Issues in small rural schools in Scotland**

(The abstracts are reprinted here in the Appendix and appear also in the Proceedings of the ECER 96 conference)*

Issues in rural primary education in Europe

Introduction

This paper reports a symposium convened at the 1996 European Conference on Educational Research on issues in rural education in Europe. The symposium brought together contributions from researchers in Sweden, Finland, Scotland, Ireland and Greece (see details of papers and their presenters on frontispiece and in the Appendix). Information about small rural schools was available also from participants from the Netherlands, Wales and England, and Norway. In addition to the presentation of the papers listed below, the symposium had two further aims: (i) to gather contextual information on rural primary schools in the countries represented at the symposium, and (ii) to bring together European researchers with a view to the formation of a European rural educational research network. The purpose of this paper is to summarise some of the common concerns which emerged and the strategies, successful in their own localities, which have the potential for transfer to other rural situations.

The following themes emerged:

1 Large numbers of small rural schools, at worst disadvantaged but generally lacking a voice in national educational policy formation ;
2 The need for professional support for rural school teachers and headteachers
3 A tendency for rural schools in some areas to be staffed by unqualified teachers or inexperienced teachers ;
4 Continued rural depopulation , subsequent school closures and in some cases consequent inter-community animosity;
5 The lack of research targeted specifically on rural school issues despite the high proportion of such schools' in many countries;
6 Official indifference to the plight of rural schools in some countries;
7 The inconsistent attitudes to education strategies (e.g. the use of multi-age classes) which are used to support or attack educational policies for economic purposes without adequate research evidence as to their educational efficacy.

Whilst each paper drew attention to one or more of these concerns, each included evidence of positive or hopeful developments and areas for further research. These included:

1 Renewed roles for small rural schools in their communities;
2 Legislation allowing for the establishment of private small rural schools to maintain provision in isolated areas;
3 Existing national databases which could be analysed with particular reference to small rural schools;
4 The positive effects of curricula which involve, in various ways, matters relevant to the local community;
5 The value of inter-school collaboration for mutual support;
6 The potential of IT and electronic communications to reduce rural isolation for pupils and teachers.

Context: rural schools in Europe

In some European countries small schools, typically with less than 100 pupils on roll represent the largest or second largest category of schools. A very high proportion of these schools serve rural communities.

Table 1: Percentage of small schools country by country

Country Date of statistics	Number on roll	No. of small schools	total schools	Cum %
Sweden 1994/5	under 99 100 - 199	1788 1235	4900	36.5 61.7
Finland 1992/3	under 78	2239	3729	60.0
Greece 1993/4	under 25 26 - 150	1786 2674	7368	24.2 60.5
Ireland 1995	under 127	1357	3203	42.4
England 1994/5	100 or less	3105	18551	16.7
N. Ireland 1994/5	100 or less	377	936	39.2
Scotland 1994/5	100 or less	815	2336	34.9
Wales 1992/3	100 or less	537	1698	31.6

Table 1 shows that in Sweden for example, 36 per cent of schools have less than 100 pupils. In Greece, a quarter of all schools have less than 25 pupils and 60 per cent less than 150 pupils, whilst in Finland, 60 per cent of elementary schools are small schools with only 1 - 3 teachers in post. Despite these large proportions, however, the number of small schools across Europe has fallen dramatically in the last few decades, as rural areas have become depopulated and economic factors have taken their toll of small schools. In Greece, for example, the percentage of schools with under 150 pupils dropped from 53 per cent to 24 per cent since 1954 and the decline continues. In England the proportion of schools with less than 100 pupils has fallen from 21 to 16 per cent in ten years.

Small schools are responsible for the education of a significant proportion of children and young people and yet, despite this preponderance of small schools in these education systems, relatively little research has been designed to investigate the effects of such schools on the lives of their pupils, teachers or communities. Instead the last two decades have seen such schools disadvantaged variously in terms of resources, teachers and research interest.

The participants in the symposium drew attention to the following specific concerns:

- **The need for support for headteachers**
  Ciaran Sugrue drew attention to a particular concern in Ireland where schools with a complement of seven or fewer staff have teaching heads with no secretarial support, no relief time and in some cases no basic communication facilities. Evangelia Tressou- Milona's paper revealed that a similar situation exists in Greek rural schools, whilst Joanna McPake described the extra pressures on headteachers in Scotland as a result of the new curriculum and devolution of financial management to schools.

- **Advantages and disadvantages of small schools**
  Lisbeth Åberg-Bengtsson pointed out that in Sweden the same arguments used to close small schools, such as a supposed disadvantage of children learning in multi-age classes, have then been adopted in larger, often urban schools on the basis of their supposed success in small schools. In fact, specifically targeted research evidence of the effects of learning in multi-age classes is very limited. There exist however, data on schools which could be further analysed with reference to small rural schools issues. Relevant here are (i) the prohibition in Greece of teaching certain subjects to mixed age groups, and (ii) , in contrast, in Finland, curricular reform which has led to an increase in the use of cross-age groupings for curricular activities.

- **Rural schools' teachers**
  Both Tressou-Milona and Åberg-Bengtsson's papers revealed concern about the teachers employed in some small rural schools. In Greece, it is common for newly qualified teachers to be assigned to isolated rural schools. These teachers appear to lack the expertise, experience and possibly motivation needed to manage the complex age-specific curriculum single-handedly and at the same time to foster school and community interaction. In Sweden, Åberg-Bengtsson has identified a considerable overlap between rural areas and the numbers of unqualified teachers. In both cases, there is a need for in-service education and professional support.

- **Funding and resources**
  Whilst limited funding is a concern for all small rural schools, the situation is much more serious in some countries than others. In Greece, for example, funding is barely enough to cover the costs of winter heating, whilst many small rural schools in Ireland are in need of basic facilities including, in some cases, a telephone.

- **Specific educational needs**
  The specific needs of children with learning difficulties or who are very able must be addressed since in rural areas these children may be isolated from children with similar needs, from necessary educational resources and from teachers with appropriate expertise.

Positive strategies

The symposium provided evidence of some positive developments where small schools are being revitalised and are finding new roles within their local communities.

First, direct links between school and community are being made through curricular emphasis on community matters, such as:

(i) the school as a resource for the community, particularly through information technology (IT);
(ii) focus on cultural traditions e.g. languages in Wales and Ireland
(iii) the involvement of the local community in curriculum design;
(iv) understanding the needs of local industry in Norway.

These themes will be elaborated below.

(i) School as community resource

The school may become a provider of resources for the community. In Greece for example, some remote schools obtained multi-media computers as part of a pilot study. In one village, the teacher, with 15 children in the school, made use of this IT facility to enable him to focus his teaching on one group of children at a time. More importantly, however, is that the community then collected enough funds to buy three more computers and subsequently asked for training in the use of computers.

In England electronic communication between rural schools for teacher and pupil support can provide also, what has been called ' electronic glue', or the basis for social cohesion within and between rural communities, particularly where the village school becomes a community communications access point (NDIP, 1996)

(ii) Sustaining cultural traditions

Recent legislation in some countries has allowed for the foundation of small private schools set up to serve rural communities where the State has withdrawn support for a small school. In Sweden, for example, some rural communities have funded and opened their own village schools, whilst in Ireland, a number of Gaelic medium schools have been established. Again, IT is facilitating links between Welsh-medium and Gaelic-medium schools, just as in some urban projects trans-European email is enhancing modern language learning.

(iii) Involvement of the local community in curriculum design

Recently in Finland, the aim of curriculum reform has been 'not merely to adapt to ongoing changes in today's world', but to 'lead the change'; to produce 'citizens with intellectual curiosity, capable of posing critical questions and finding a wide variety of answers' (see full paper by Kimonen and Nevalainen (p.2)). These reforms required each school to draw up its own curriculum based on a set of national guidelines which 'allows schools to focus on local features' . The starting point, 'involves making the students familiar with the local environment and related problems, with the economic, industrial and cultural life and with the needs of their own community.' The critical aspect of these reforms is the importance of the involvement of the

local community, and in particular the fact that ' all members of the school community including students parents and other people active in the functioning of the school, can collaborate in the writing of the curriculum'

(iv) Rural education and local industry

In Norway, the National Curriculum places an onus on schools to develop a curriculum which will equip the children of a region with understanding of local needs and skills and knowledge to continue to live in that region and to contribute to local industry and economy (Solstad, 1995)

A common factor in the examples above, is the role of information technology, whilst a concern in small rural schools is to provide adequately for children with special needs. Current projects in the UK under the UK Education Departments' Superhighways Initiative (EDSI) are developing the use of information technology and electronic communication including video conferencing to support such children (e.g. McPake's description of the Northern STARS project, in which able children in the Highlands are being supported through email.)

A European rural education research network?

After the symposium, participants met to discuss the possibility of a forming a collaborative rural education research network. This discussion revealed further commonalties, and resources and resulted in a list of potential areas for research and collaboration in rural education.

Rune Kvalsund of Norway emphasised the need for comparative research on small schools in rural and urban settings in order to strengthen any points about rural schools. He described his own research on children's informal learning in school. In a multi-case study involving 19 schools of which 12 were two or three teachers schools, he studied pupils' interaction networks, learning outcomes and social self-concept and found associations between small schools and pupil cooperation with more cross-age and cross-gender interaction, whereas larger schools were associated with greater egocentrism. As a further resource, Rune has reviewed of all the Norwegian work on rural education.

Lisbeth Aberg-Bengtsson from Sweden, emphasised the need for more research on specific strategies such as multi-age classes on learning. Whilst Kvalsund's pupil network system could be used to examine informal learning and cross-age interactions, Aberg-Bengtsson pointed to the existence in Sweden of national education databases, which could be reanalysed in terms of school size. Whilst, on the one hand, multi-age teaching in small schools or classes might be beneficial for children's learning, the greater incidence of unqualified teaching staff in small rural schools may undermine such benefits.

Eija Kimonen and Raimo Nevalainen from Finland, focused on the recent curriculum reforms in Finland which have required schools to become 'learning centers' for their local community, with an emphasis on the

relevance of the curriculum for children and the involvement of the community in determining the curriculum within general guidelines. The emphasis has been on active learning. In a case study of a school which has pioneered this reform, notable positive outcomes in terms of pupil interaction and motivation have been observed. Further, Nevalainen has data on teacher participation in the community based on a survey of 160 rural schools teachers.)

Ina Williams and Richard Thorpe from Wales pointed out the positive value of interschool collaboration for teacher in-service support. They have developed a system of scoring various features of cluster developments over the three stages identified by Galton et al. (1991). They have looked too at the focus on INSET in clusters, finding more in-cluster INSET in more mature clusters. Whilst inter-school collaboration would seem to be an important source of support for teachers in rural schools where the geographical proximity or ease of communication (e.g. using IT) makes this a viable proposition, they too emphasised the role of the school in its community. In Wales, for example, there has been an influx of English immigrants who have taken over local housing and created or exacerbated the split between school and community. At the same time, the reorganisation of the Welsh counties into more smaller counties has left some areas with a concentration of small schools, few larger, urban schools and loss of contact with urban centres.

Conclusion: activities for a European rural education network

There are several areas of common concern and much potential for collaborative research and sharing of expertise within the group that met in Seville. The following list of activities summarises the areas of concern, and will be taken forward for further discussion when the group meets again at the European Conference on Educational Research in Frankfurt-am-Main in September, 1997.

1 Basic mapping of small rural schools in each country and across Europe to see where they are greatest. This should be combined with a descriptions of typical small schools, their surroundings, funding and facilities.

2 Re-examination of existing data to investigate small schools results and to compare rural and urban schools.

3 Development of a literature base on research in European rural education and small schools.

4 Case studies and examples of the renewed role of the rural school in the community and the role of the teacher in this process ...

5 Targeted research on mixed age and mono-age classes and their effectiveness in rural and urban schools

6 Study of the development of cluster cohesion and interschool communication as support for teachers and headteachers

7 Identification of the examples of electronic communications and IT in revitalising and sustaining rural schools.

8 Training of teachers to work in rural schools and with rural communities: to what extent is this addressed in initial teachers education or in-service education?

9 Headteachers in rural schools need training in management and instructional leadership skills, key features of effective primary schooling.

10 Construction of a glossary of educational terminology to ensure common understanding and usage terms such as mixed age teaching, multi-age classes, vertical grouping etc.

11 Comparative rural-urban research to strengthen studies of small rural schools.

Linda Hargreaves: March 1997

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APPENDIX

ABSTRACTS* OF THE PAPERS PRESENTED AT:
European Conference on Educational Research, Seville, Spain
25 - 29 September 1996

Symposium:
Issues in rural primary education in Europe

RURAL EDUCATION IN IRELAND: ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Ciaran Sugrue
St. Patrick's College (A College of Dublin City University) Dublin, Eire

This paper is in three parts. First, it gives a general description of primary schooling in Ireland with particular attention to small rural schools. Second, it identifies a series of problems which have significant impact in the context of rural schooling. Third, the paper concludes by isolating particular issues which should be priorities for attention.

Traditionally Ireland has been an agricultural society. Despite rapid urbanisation and industrialisation during the past 25 years, many small rural schools continue to exist. There is a total of 3,200 primary schools in the Irish Republic which cater for children from age 4 - 12. Schools with 8 teachers or more have administrative principals (with no teaching responsibilities) but approximately 2,600 schools have less than 8 teachers while there are more two and three teacher schools than any other category. The vast majority of schools are state funded but church controlled and per capita funding is very low by international comparison. Approximately four-fifths of all primary schools have teaching principals who have full-time teaching responsibilities while many are without any office accommodation or secretarial assistance. In a time of rapid change and rhetoric of continuous improvement this is a major impediment. Additional problems are:- isolation, lack of resources, facilities and expertise, declining rolls, rural disadvantage, and an ageing workforce with a disproportionate number of older teachers in small rural schools. The paper concludes that, from a professional perspective, dealing with isolation and providing professional support are the most productive avenues for school improvement, as well as the need to generate a literature on leadership and development in small rural schools.

Ciaran Sugrue, St Patrick's College (A College of Dublin City University) Drumcondra, Dublin 9, Eire

EDUCATION IN SMALL RURAL SWEDISH SCHOOLS: AN INITIAL OVERVIEW OF THE FIELD

Lisbeth Åberg-Bengtsson
Göteborg University, Sweden

This position paper focuses mainly on some aspects of equivalence of education for all students (as stated by the national curriculum) in relation to small rural schools. Since 1991 several regulations in the School Act have been changed and in 1994 a new curriculum was introduced in Swedish schools. The implementation of these changes indicates interesting fields of possible research as to what the implications for small rural schools will be. When scrutinising the official statistics and reports it was found that explicit data concerning small rural schools per se were not easily found. Existing data bases could be used in more elaborated ways for investigating small rural schools.

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THE SMALL RURAL SCHOOLS IN GREECE: A NEW ROLE IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

Evangelia Tressou-Milona,
Aristotle University of Thessalonika, Greece

Greece is full of small isolated villages both in the mainland and the islands. Every one of these villages had until recently its own small school, which most of the times was a one-place school (one teacher for all six classes of primary school). The social, economic and technological changes that have swept Greek society in the last thirty years have determined the life style and development of small rural communities and had a powerful impact on the function and evolution of small rural schools. Emigration and urbanism depopulated the rural country and urbanised most of the villages in plains. Most small rural schools in remote areas, especially one-place schools, increasingly lose their student population and in most cases close down. Villages in plains, either maintain their small schools or merge with schools of neighbouring villages to create a regular, full-staffed school. The unbearable maintenance and staffing expenses of these small schools coupled with the seemingly negative governmental attitude towards the institution of small schools adds to the problem of depopulation of these schools. The prospects of small, rural schools appear meagre, an estimation borne out by statistics: in the last 40 years the percentage of small one-place schools decreased from 53% to 24% of the total number of schools in the country.

The institution of one-place schools is on the decline. State politics as well as attitudes of educators and policy makers point to a tendency to replace it rather than redefine its role. Political will and know-how is the first step to the right direction. Experience of successful examples and global collaboration can do the rest.

Dr. Evangelia Tressou-Milona, Assistant Prof., School of Education, Aristotle University of Thessalonika 54006 Thessalonika Greece

TOWARDS ACTIVE LEARNING. A CASE STUDY ON ACTIVE LEARNING IN A SMALL RURAL SCHOOL IN FINLAND

Eija Kimonen & Raimo Nevalainen
University of Jyväskylä, Finland

The purpose of the international study initiated by OECD/CERI was to compare the active learning of students and of teachers in the educational practices of seven countries. The aspects of active learning examined included goal setting, task structuring accessing of information, processing of work and learning, utilising the outcomes of work and learning, and assessment procedures. The purpose of this case study was to describe, what is meant by active learning in a small rural school in Finland. The object of this study was a rural two-teacher elementary school (grades 1-6) with 25 students. Data were collected during six day visits to the school and the village community and data collection involved tape-recorded interviews, observation, and document analysis. Interviews were carried out with both the class teachers in the school, students (5 in all), parents (4 in all) and the chairperson of the school board. The research data was analysed by qualitative methods.

The process of change in the case study school from a traditional school culture towards a more progressive culture began during the late 1980s. The transformation of the instructional goals and practices of the school was promoted by constructivist conceptions of knowledge and learning and by the new thinking with regard to the curriculum that emerged in Finland during that time. The educational goals and principles of the teachers in the case study school were reflected in the school's practices of action, where co-operation between the members of the school community began to be more strongly emphasised. Students worked on their projects in small groups made up of students from across the age range, where they interacted with one another and co-operatively solved the problems that emerged from the task. During co-operation students had an active role characterised by goal-oriented, self-assessment activity which was directed by metacognitions. Stress was also laid on independent initiative, a sense of responsibility, and co-operativeness. Students accessed

information using a variety of methods and from diverse sources both with in the school and outside it. The outcomes of projects were utilised to some extent. Learning was evaluated both by the teacher and by the student and his or her parents. Methods of work and learning based on active learning have developed many positive features in students, including increased initiative and a growing sense of responsibility.

The teacher in the case study school sought to continuously develop himself, his teaching practices, and his teaching materials. The challenges and problems of the school activity formed the basis for the teacher's learning motivation and encouraged him to develop his own work. The teacher has acted as an agent of change affecting school culture by describing his experiences and observations as an implementor of a school-based curriculum to other teachers. According to the study, the teacher's active learning consists of the independent solving of problems arising from the everyday life of the school, and of the active accessing of knowledge and skills required in the construction of new models of thinking and action.

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